



Matthew 23:23–24

23 “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former.

24 You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.

Reflection

(Today's reflection is given by Craig Tubman)

When I was young I liked to put on costumes. I had a He-Man outfit from the 80's cartoon show. It came with a mask, a plastic sword and a breastplate. I would play in the backyard as He-Man, defender of the universe. Kids have great imaginations, I'd get lost in that world and then at lunch I'd take off the mask and just be plain-old Craig again, eating his sandwich.

In the ancient world, Greek theatre would pick up on the imagination as well and actors would wear different masks to indicate to the audience which character they were playing. Much like the backyard play, the masks would give the actor a whole world

in which they could perform, but of course at the end of the performance they would take off the mask and go home, not as the character but as themselves.

The term used in Greek theatre for these actors was *hypokrites* which refers to being under a mask. For kids and actors alike this is a marvellous experience, the wide horizon of being someone you are not. But what happens when this approach ceases to be a part of childhood or the stage and becomes a way of life?

In Matthew 23 Jesus picks up on this ancient theatre phrase to refer to the religious leaders of his day: hypocrites. Men who live their lives behind masks – who present themselves as one person but in reality are someone else. Through his lan-

guage of condemnation Jesus indicates that this is not a good pattern for life, especially for those religious leaders of his day.

He notes that they wear a mask of generosity – people see them give a tenth of their spices to the temple – which Jesus affirms is a good thing to do! But behind their mask of generosity they have hearts that are selfish. They do not seek justice, mercy and faithfulness. To use a term we've used before, they major on the minors or to use Jesus' words, "they strain out a gnat and swallow a camel".

Why would they do such a thing, you may ask? Well, in truth it may not have been a conscious decision. These outward spiritual displays seemed to be the culture of

religious leadership they had inherited. They were in many respects staying true to what they thought was the key to being 'religious', being 'close to God' – that is outward adherence to law. But here Jesus calls not just these men he is addressing but the whole culture of religion under judgment.

Now before we throw these religious leaders under the bus, we must take time to reflect on our own culture. Our own culture which uses phrases like; “fake it till you make it”, “just tell them what they want to hear” and “never let your guard down”. It appears that hypocrisy is not just a mark of a small group of ancient Israelite leaders, but in fact a broader skill commonly used by all humans.

Why is this? Well, I'm no psychologist and I can only go off my own hypocrisy in the past to hazard a guess, but I'd say we all tend to wear masks because we're afraid. We are afraid that we won't be liked for who we are. Or that we aren't good enough to get that promotion. Or the unhelpful patterns in our life that we turn to for comfort like drinking, gambling, pornography or lying are too shameful to share with others. So, what do we do? We 'put on a brave face' and go out into the world.

I take it that there was great pressure on these religious leaders to be the 'holy ones' of Israel. But the problem was they weren't holy! Only God is. And so they took about giving the impression of holiness whilst not fostering the person who lay behind the mask.

Whilst at times it's fun to pretend to be someone you're not, in the long run it is entirely destructive. God sees past our masks and what he calls us into is a life of slow transformation not a life of acting.

Jesus' words to the religious leaders of the day is to stop majoring on the minors and instead, whilst doing the outward deeds of generosity, ensure that they are constantly looking under the hood of their hearts and seeking the very change of personhood that our God calls us all into.

Any religious leader that simply encourages the adherence to outward practice without talking about the new person that God in his grace wants to transform you into is not speaking on behalf of the real

God. Jesus makes it clear that God does not want actors, he wants new people.

Whilst Jesus knew that the holiness of these religious leaders was a mere show, he also knew that his own holiness was not. Jesus' previous preaching about the kingdom of heaven coming to earth was a reference to himself. And here in the shadow of the cross and the resurrection Jesus gives a new path to holiness. Not through pretending but through participation in his holiness.

To participate in Christ's holiness means to take off our own masks and to stop pretending. It means confession of sin, it means acceptance of forgiveness and it means having the courage to see yourself new as a child of God. Jesus words, 'woe

to you teachers of the law and Pharisees' were given precisely because they were not willing to take off their masks and find their holiness in their Messiah, their saviour and their Lord.

Think and Pray

Take some time today to consider if there are any masks that you are wearing? Are you trying to strain out gnats while all the time you're swallowing camels?

Imagine what your life would look like if you could be truly yourself. Not the shameful version of yourself, but the glorious version of yourself as God's child, his or her ambassador, his or her witness and his or her workshop as you let him change you from the inside out. Then pray that God

would speed on this transformation today.